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ABSTRACT

Twenty linguistic features found in essays of Creole-speaking students taking remedial writing courses at Hunter College are discussed and illustrated. The students spoke a creole or post-creole language as their mother tongue. The language varieties, which are those most frequently encountered in East Coast urban centers from Boston to Miami, are either Haitian Creole French or the following varieties of creole or post-creole English: American Black English vernacular (BEV), Gullah, Bahamian, Belizean, Jamaican, Trinidadian, and Guyanese. While the vocabulary and certain other features of these varieties vary considerably, they share many structural features influenced by African languages that cause similar kinds of interference in acquiring standard English. To illustrate these features and their origin, reference is made to parallel sentences in Yoruba (a Nigerian language), Haitian Creole French, and BEV or other English-based varieties. The examples illustrate lack of subject-verb agreement, the absence of the "-ed" or suppletive form of the past tense and the past participle, inappropriate use of the present perfect tense, different words used for the verb "be," treating adjectives as verbs, unusual features of the noun phrase, and unusual word order. In addition to syntactical divergences, examples of interference at the lexical level are provided. It is concluded that creole-speaking students' problems in writing standard English arise from conflicting community norms rather than from any individual language deficiency. (SW)

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The Creole Core: Grammatical Interference in College Composition

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1985 Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

The concerns of those of us who teach English as a second language and standard English as a second dialect converge when it comes to the language acquisition problems of students who speak creole or post-creole languages, which range from Haitian Creole French to Jamaican Creole English and American Black English vernacular.

A creole is a language which has a pidgin in its ancestry; pidgins are formed when two or more groups with no common language come into contact of some duration for a purpose such as trade. Pidgins were formed in Africa and th - in the Caribbean from the seventeenth century onward, first in the trade of - opean goods for African goods and slaves and later as a means of communication among Africans of different language groups who had been brought together to work on plantations in the New World. Since the social conditions of slavery precluded adequate access to the languages of the relatively small number of Europeans administering such plantation colonies, acquisition of these languages was incomplete. Although the mother tongues of the Africans numbered in the hundreds, many were typologically similar and shared common features in phonology, syntax and semantics which were carried over into the new Caribbean languages which drew their lexicons from English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch.

The children born on such plantations who heard no other language but the pidgin made it their mother tongue, creating the creoles that became established as the language of the community. The precise formula for the combination of forces which shaped these new languages (e.g. influence from the substrate African languages or universal features in language genesis and development) is still a matter of debate, but it is clear that these languages share a surprising number of structural features unknown in the European languages from which they drew their lexicons. Many of these features are found in Niger-Congo languages and are clearly African in origin, although creole languages—or at least features borrowed from them—have spead via diffusion to groups not of African origin (e.g. Barbadian whites, Nicaragua's Rama Indians or Hawaii's Polynesians and Orientals).

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Although some creole languages were cut off from their European lexical source language because of political events (e.g. the English-based creoles of Suriname, which have developed into quite distinct languages), most have coexisted for several hundred years, with the European language enjoying official status and the creole being regarded as the badge of ignorance and backwardness (despite the covert affection its speakers might have for it). As creole-speakers have gained access to education and economic and political power over the past century, many have acquired the standard language or a variety close to it, creating a continuum ranging from the basilect (the variety most like the original creole and least like the standard) to the acrolect (the standard, with some local phonological and lexical features), with intermediate mesolect varieties. It is largely the latter post-creole varieties which have survived in the United States in the form of Gullah (an English-based creole with many Caribbean features spoken in coastal South Carolina and Georgia) and vernacular Black English (a variety in the last stages of decreolization). Creole French is spoken in Louisiana, while creole English and a creole-influence dialect of English are spoken in Hawaii.

Creole and post-creole languages were long considered simply aberrant varieties of the languages from which they drew their lexicons—"bad" English, French, etc, spoken by ignorant people. It is only comparatively recently that more than a few linguists have begun studying these languages systematically to discover the forces which have shaped them. Much of this information is still not generally available to those teaching English to speakers of such varieties, although the usefulness of this knowledge is clear: as most ESL teachers know from their own experience, the more we know about our students' first languages, the more efficiently we can help them acquire proficiency in using the target language—standard English. Moreover, there is an important attitudinal advantage to be derived from gaining more knowledge about creole and post-creole languages: the teacher will come to realize that their students' "errors" in writing standard English stem not from individuals' deficiencies but rather from the norms of their speech communities, which sometimes conflict with those of the target language (Winer 1981). Knowing this can help the teacher avoid an erroneous

assessment of the student's intellectual ability, which can have a very destructive effect on the whole learning process.

The remainder of this paper will focus on some 20 linguistic features found in essays of students taking remedial writing courses at Hunter College; all of them speak a creole or post-creole language as their mother tongue. These varieties are those most frequently encountered in urban centers on the East Coast of the United States from Boston to Miami: American Black English vernacular (BEV), Gullah, Bahamian, Belizean, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Guyanese (all varieties of creole or post-creole English) and Haitian Creole French. While the vocabulary and certain other features of these varieties vary considerably, they share many structural features influenced by African languages which cause similar kinds of interference in acquiring standard English. To illustrate these features and their origin more clearly, reference will be made to parallel sentences in Yoruba (a Nigerian language), Haitian Creole French, and BEV or other English-based varieties. The latter are from Hancock 1979, while the others were provided by Hunter College students, Abraham Obadare (Yoruba) and Hedley Gaujean (Haitian), to whom special thanks are due.

The first feature, which all ESL and SESD teachers are familiar with, is the lack of subject-verb agreement. Of course this feature is not confined to African, creole and post-creole languages; it is found in a great many of the world's languages, but it is interesting to trace the likely origin of this feature in Black English. If we compare the third-person singular and plural forms of the present tense in the following languages and varieties, we can see there is none of the inflectional agreement found in Indo-European languages:

1.		She sings	They sing
a.	BEV	She sing_	Dey sing_
b.	Haitian	Li chanté_	Yo chanté_
c.	Yoruba	Oun kọrin_	Àwọn kọrin_

The following sentences, also lacking subject-verb agreement (but now transferred to standard written English, where it is inappropriate), are from Hunter student essays (the mother tongue of the student is indicated in parentheses):

2. She is loved by everyone that know_ her. (BEV)
3. Whether a person do well or n t depends on their abilities. (Jamaican)
4. A second language make_ it easier to communicate. (Haitian)

The unnaturalness of subject-verb agreement for many students leads to hypercorrection, or using the third-person singular ending where it is inappropriate in standard English:

5. They tens to stay close together. (Guyanese)
6. Many tourists finds it intriguing. (Belizean)

Similar transfer can interfere with the -ed verbal inflection as well. In the African and creole languages under discussion, time is dealt with quite differently from European languages, in which finite verbs must indicate tense: the setting in time is made clear at the beginning of the discourse and there is no need to keep indicating the time under discussion. Thus the verb stem can be used to refer to either present or past events; the BEV, Haitian and Yoruba equivalents of "She sings" given above could all be translated as "she sang", depending on the context. If there is a shift in focus to a prior event, however, this can be indicated with a preverbal marker (BEV"She been sing"; Haitian "Li te chanté"; Yoruba "Oun ti kọrin"). Interference from this system on standard English can be found in the absence of the -ed or suppletive form for not only the past tense but also the past participle:

7. She is always prepare_ for the ups and downs. (BEV)
8. There would be less money spend by the governmnt. (Bahamian)

As with the present tense -s inflection, there is also hypercorrection:

9. I do not believed that this is true. (Belizean)
10. He should strived to reach it. (Belizean)

On the other hand, English had can be made to do the work of the preverbal marker of anterior action mentioned above:

11. At the age of five her mother had died and she moved to the South. (BEV)

Since there is no exact equivalent of the present perfect tense in these varieties, this tense is often used inappropriately in writing standard English:

12. In the Bahamas I have been educated at a Catholic school. (Bahamian)

Finally, there is a phonological rule in many African and creole languages which combines with the syntactic rule discussed above to prevent the pronunciation of the -ed ending when it forms part of a consonant cluster, e.g. missed, pronounced like mist. The African and creole languages under discussion favor an open syllable consisting of a consonant and a vowel (the latter possibly nasalized). Even in the post-creoles there is a marked tendency not to pronounce the second element in a final consonant cluster, particularly when the consonants are both voiced or both unvoiced (cf. BEV des 'desk' or Haitian ris vs. French risque 'risk'—both unvoiced—or BEV roun 'round' or Haitian wonn vs. French ronde 'round' (policeman's)—both voiced). Transfer of this rule to the pronunciation of standard English can be seen in its reflection in writing:

13. It could cause you your life. (Haitian)

Again, there is hypercorrection in attempts to "restore" the simplified consonant cluster to its original form:

14. My gold in life is to become a doctor. (Trinidadian)

The combined effect of these phonological and syntactic rules is to make the tense system of standard English opaque, as seen in the following sentences lacking tense agreement:

15. I told Bob that I am going to the telephone. (Guyanese)

16. In 1975 we came here because my parents feel we are ready to go to high school. (Haitian)

Another basic difference in the verb phrase has to do with the expression of the various functions of be in standard English. Many African and creole languages have distinct words for be depending on whether the predicate is a noun, adjective, prepositional phrase of location, etc. (Holm 1984). When a noun follows, an equative copula is required:

		He	is	a carpenter.
17. a.	Jamaican	Im	a	kaapinta.
b.	Haitian	Li	se	chapant.
c.	Yoruba	Oun	ọe	káfíntà.

On the other hand, adjectives are a subcategory of verbs and require no form of be:

		She	is	all right.
18. a.	Jamaican	Im		aarait.
b.	Haitian	Li		oke.
c.	Yoruba	Oun		dára.

This rule can be transfered to English, as in the following sentences in which adjectives and similar constructions are treated as verbs:

19. I will proud of it. (Haitian)
20. It don't worth nothing. (Jamaican)
21. They should allowed to go. (Jamaican)

The zero form of be can also appear before locative phrases and in forming the progressive tenses:

22. My family always there to help me. (Haitian)
23. They actually killing an infant. (Jamaican)

A final form of be not found in standard English seems to have evolved from a creole construction with a habitual marker (Rickford 1974); this is used to express repeated action or a permanent state of affairs:

24. You also be treated like an adult. (BEV)
25. Marriage does not always be successful. (Guyanese)

Negation in the African and creole languages under discussion does not require do-support:

		She	does	not	sing.
26 a.	Jamaican	Im		na	sing.
b.	Haitian	Li		pa	chanté.
c.	Yoruba	Oun		kò	kọrin.

Under pressure from the standard, na or no in the English-based creoles became dõ from don't, still a single morpheme despite its greater similarity to the English form. In post-creoles, forms of no without do-support can also become don't:

27. Don't matter what happen, she will be there. (Jamaican)

Regarding the noun phrase, the African and creole languages under discussion do not have a plural inflection corresponding to English -s; there is no marking of plurality except for a form identical to the pronoun 'they', which can be used to emphasize the plurality of definite animate nouns:

28.

		his	friends		
a.	Jamaican	im	fren	dem	(lit. 'his friend they')
b.	Haitian		zami-li-yo		(lit. 'friend-his-they')
c.	Yoruba	àwon	ọ̀rẹ́	rẹ̀	(lit. 'they friend his')

This can interfere with number agreement within the standard English noun phrase:

29. Teenagers are causing so much crimes. (BEV)

As can be seen in the sentences equivalent to 'He is a carpenter' above, the use of articles also differs from English in the languages under discussion. Indefinite singular nouns without an article can be used to represent an entire category, and this rule is sometimes transfered into written English:

30. __ Convict spends only a few years in jail. (Belizean)

Moreover, the languages under discussion have no inflection to mark nouns as possessive; this is done by juxtaposition:

31.

		my	father's	house	
a.	BEV	my	daddy__	house	
b.	Haitian			kai papa_ m	(lit. 'house father my')
c.	Yoruba			ilé bàbà_ mi	(" " " ")

Interference of this rule in writing standard English is common:

32. The men_and women_role is slowly changing. (BEV)

Beyond the features of the verb phrase and noun phrase discussed above, the African and creole languages under discussion can differ from English in word order. For example, they have no rule requiring the inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb (or be) to form a question:

33

		Where	is	it?		
a.	Jamaican	We		im	de?	(lit. 'Where it is')
b.	Haitian	Koté		li	ye?	" " "
c.	Yoruba	Níbo ni		ó	wà?	" " "

Under pressure from the standard, BEV has adopted the inverted question word order not only in direct question ("Where is it?") but also in embedded questions ("I want to know where is it.") Uncertainty on word order can also cause creole speakers to hypercorrect:

34. I will be talking about myself, who <u>am</u> I, and what <u>am</u> I doing in college. (Jamaican)

The above divergences are all on the syntactic level and can be summarized in general statements. There are many more divergences between standard English and the creoles or post-creoles that are confined to particular lexical items. Their description requires a comparison of the lexicons involved, an open-ended task that cannot be attempted here. However, since this is precisely the source of so many problems in students' writing, some examples of interference on the lexical level will be given. First, there are differing subcategorizational rules for apparently identical items. For example, in standard English when <u>easy</u> is followed by an infinitive ("John is easy to please"), the latter is understood to have a passive meaning, whereas other adjectives such as <u>eager</u> ("John is eager to please") trigger an active meaning in the following infinitive. Interference from a different subcategorizational rule is clear in the following sentence from a student essay:

35. Most women are very <u>easy to panic</u>. (Jamaican)

Such rules can determine many kinds of collocations, including suitable particles for two-word verbs:

36. The father gambled <u>up</u> all their money. (Gullah)

Some such shifts are quite subtle; in standard English <u>turn</u> in the sense of 'become' is usually followed by an adjective denoting an undesirable quality (e.g. <u>turn cold</u>, <u>turn sour</u>, etc.) rather than a desirable one (e.g. *<u>turn good</u>). However, this is not necessarily the case in all varieties of English:

37. New York is for smart people. If you ain't smart, you <u>turn smart</u> in less than a week here or you might die. (BEV)

To conclude on that upbeat note, teachers can turn more sophisticated about the kinds of problems in writing standard English that might be encountered by students whose first language is a creole or post-creole variety.

By learning more about the structure of their students' first language variety, teachers will be in a better position to anticipate which features of standard English are likely to prove troublesome so that these points can be dealt with more effectively in the composition class. Moreover, it is very important that teachers realize that when students are from a community that speaks a creole or post-creole variety of English, their problems in writing standard English arise from conflicting community norms rather than from any individual language deficiency. Teachers with this perspective are in a much better position to help such students achieve fuller competence in standard English composition.

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